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Accused Spy Halts Trial to Plead Guilty

JACKSONVILLE, Fla., Sept. 28 (AP) — A former Army warrant officer interrupted his Federal trial today and pleaded guilty to conspiring to sell military secrets to the Soviet Union over a 17-year period. In return, the Justice Department dropped three counts of espionage.

Sentencing for the defendant, Joseph G. Helmich Jr., was set for Nov. 5. The maximum penalty is life imprisonment.

Mr. Helmich, 44 years old, made his surprise plea as his trial entered its second week. He insisted that the information he relayed to the Soviet was not as important as the Government contended.

Under questioning by Federal District Court Judge Susan Black, Mr. Helmich admitted that he made contact with Soviet agents in Paris in January 1963, while he was facing a possible court-martial because of bad checks.

"I had been in the Army since I was 17 and it was the only family I had known," Mr. Helmich said. "I got into some financial problems."

\$131,000 in '63 and '64

From January 1963 to July 1964, the charges against him said, a Soviet intelligence agent paid him \$131,000 for information about the KL-7 Cryptosystem, including the coding machine's parts, repair and maintenance manuals and lists of codes.

However, the KL-7 machine was not as important to the armed forces in 1963 as the Government contends, according to Mr. Helmich, who was based in Paris with the United States Signal Corps.

Discussing information on the KL-7,

Mr. Helmich said: "Anything that was being passed was no longer being used on the first line of defense. It was really getting limited use."

Nevertheless, the information ranged from classified to top secret, he confirmed.

Mr. Helmich, who pleaded not guilty to all four counts on July 18, denied entering the conspiracy to hurt the United States. But he told Judge Black that he knew he had been dealing with the Soviet and that the Soviet would use the information to their fullest.

No 'Intent to Injure' U.S.

"Your honor, while I knew it was to the advantage of a foreign nation, it wasn't done with the intent to injure the United States of America," said Mr. Helmich, who resigned from the Army in 1968 as a chief warrant officer.

The conspiracy charge alleged that as late as August 1980, Mr. Helmich made contact with the Soviet to try to pick up money that was supposedly being held for him in a Swiss bank account.

Mr. Helmich, a Fort Lauderdale, Fla., native, said that in fact he had made the contact but had learned that the Soviet had no funds set aside for him.

His court-appointed attorney, Peter Dearing, interjected: "They lied, your honor."

Another portion of the charge stated that Mr. Helmich had agreed to make contact with the Soviet in case of attack. Mr. Helmich said he had never warned the Soviet about any war plans but admitted he had entered such an agreement.

The plea change was made after jurors heard a Federal Bureau of Investigation agent testify Friday about Mr. Helmich's confession, in which he described the first meeting at the Soviet Embassy in Paris, later meetings with a K.G.B. agent at the Soviet Trade Mission, and shuttles from Fort Bragg, N.C., to Paris for further contacts.

The F.B.I. agent, James K. Murphy, told the jury that Mr. Helmich had said he would have been court-martialed for passing bad checks if he had not come up with the money in 24 hours.

"Mr. Helmich told me he decided to contact the Russians and make some money that way," said Mr. Murphy, who interviewed the suspect Feb. 4, 1981 at a motel in Niagara Falls, N.Y. At the time, Mr. Helmich was working as a tile-sitter in Niagara Falls. He later moved to Jacksonville Beach.

Mr. Murphy said that Mr. Helmich had taken a coded message on his first trip to the Soviet Embassy to show "he had access to this type of stuff."

By July 1964, Mr. Murphy said, Mr. Helmich had met with a K.G.B. agent, identified by prosecutors as Viktor Lyubimov, who took him on at least two high-speed drives through Paris streets. Other meetings were held at the Soviet Trade Mission and at two French cafes, Mr. Murphy said.

The dealings continued after Mr. Helmich had been transferred from Paris to the 50th Signal Battalion at Fort Bragg, N.C., Mr. Murphy said.

Mr. Helmich made four trips to Paris from the United States, even taking his wife and sister along on one, Mr. Murphy said.